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ABSTRACT

This one-page abstract summarizes results of a final report of a federally funded research project titled, "Research Integration Project: Analysis and Review of Research on Least Restrictive Environments for Handicapped Learners." The goal of the project was the review, analysis, and interpretation of research on the concept of "least restrictive environment." The paper defines the term and examines the legal and legislative background which is based on the assumption that removal from the regular classroom setting potentially abrogates a student's rights. Results of evaluation of various administrative arrangements indicate that differences between regular and self-contained special education classroom environments are not typically as large as differences in classroom characteristics such as curriculum, teacher-student ratio, and teacher qualifications. The project also reviewed those variables related to the design of instruction and the educational environment encompassing factors related to both academic achievement and social outcomes. It is concluded that the amount of time a student is integrated is but one variable which may, or may not, have an impact on student achievement and/or social growth. (DB)

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RESEARCH & RESOURCES ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

ABSTRACT III
DECEMBER 1985LEAST RESTRICTIVE
ENVIRONMENT

Research Integration Project: Analysis and Review of Research on Least Restrictive Environments for Handicapped Learners is a 394-page final report of a research project funded by the U. S. Department of Education, Special Education Programs. The goal of this project was the review, analysis, and interpretation of research on the concept of "least restrictive environment" (LRE) in special education policy and law. Least restrictive environment is defined as integrated and appropriate instruction which stipulates that a child should be placed in the least segregated (i.e., most normal) environment in which an appropriate instructional program can be delivered.

LEGAL AND
LEGISLATIVE
BACKGROUND

The principle of LRE has its constitutional antecedents in the Fourteenth Amendment which requires that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law and that all people have a right to equal protection under the law. Accordingly, the judicial history of LRE emphasizes two key aspects of the concept. First, the government may abrogate the rights of the individual only when it is necessary to provide appropriate treatment. Second, in providing treatment that necessarily involves restricting some of the rights of the individual, the government must do so in the least intrusive, least drastic, or least restrictive way possible. The two major legislative enactments related to special education (P.L. 94-142) and the delivery of services to persons with handicaps (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) reflect the same assumption: Removal from the regular classroom setting represents a potential abrogation of a handicapped student's rights and may be done only when—and to the extent—necessary to provide an appropriate program.

ADMINISTRATIVE
DECISIONS AND
PRACTICES

Various administrative arrangements have been traditionally used to define the least restrictive environment, including regular education classrooms; special education resource rooms (where students typically spend part of the day); self-contained special education classrooms (where students spend all of the school day); segregated schools; and residential institutions. The assumption is that these administrative arrangements represent different—and pedagogically meaningful—approaches to student performance and achievement. The authors evaluate the degree to which empirical evidence supports this assumption, and conclude that the differences between regular and self-contained special education classroom environments are not typically as large as differences in classroom characteristics such as curriculum, teacher-student ratio, and teacher qualifications in settings grouped under the same administrative arrangement. The authors conclude that, "this raises the possibility that administrative typologies of special education service settings may be pedagogically unimportant" (p. 16).

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INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN VARIABLES

The third perspective on the LRE includes a review of those variables related to the design of instruction and of the student's educational environment. This review encompasses factors related to both academic achievement, such as instructional time and social outcomes, such as cooperative learning arrangements. For example, the review of instructional time suggests that the following characteristics may be typical of effective special education environments.

- High student instructional engagement.
- Rigorous teacher monitoring of student activity.
- Regular teacher feedback to students.
- Well-sequenced learning tasks, appropriate to the student's achievement level and broken down into incremental steps.
- Clearly specified performance requirements.
- Minimal transition time, management time, and activities indirectly related to academic performance.

CONCLUSION

Current research in the field of special education has been shaped by major socio-legal factors. Legislative mandates have focused education delivery systems of "compliance" issues related to assuring the rights of handicapped students, but not necessarily on issues related to the effectiveness of special education environments. For example, researchers frequently refer to LRE as a construct represented by the extent to which a handicapped student is appropriately integrated with normal students. There is the inference that the more time integrated, the greater the positive outcomes. It is, according to the authors, more appropriate to recognize that the amount of time a student is integrated is but one variable which, by law, must be maximized. It may—or may not—have an impact on student achievement and/or social growth. The final worth of any approach to the analysis of educational environments must be evaluated on the basis of the effectiveness of the interventions it produces and not merely on the basis of compliance with the mandated rights of handicapped students.

Research Integration Project: Analysis and Review of Research on Least Restrictive Environments for Handicapped Learners. Final Report, 1984, 394pp. Melvyn I. Semmel, Charles A. Peck, Joan Liever. Grant No. G008100279. Available for \$.75 (microfiche) plus \$.22 postage, or \$28.80 (hard copy) plus \$3.82 postage, from ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304 (1-800-227-3742). Order ED Number 254 036.

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